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Abstract

1 THE ROLE OF THE KENYAN WRITER The concept of a Kenyan writer has always been abstract but even so it seems there is a literary suit that categorises him or her. The mention of a writer in Kenya is almost swallowed by the shadow of the icon Ngugi. Recasting this image seems a monolithic feat, which might or might not be done; I don't know whether that is good or bad.

DAVID MAVIA

Shifting Visions: Of English Language Usage in Kenya

I THE ROLE OF THE KENYAN WRITER

The concept of a Kenyan writer has always been abstract but even so it seems there is a literary suit that categorises him or her. The mention of a writer in Kenya is almost swallowed by the shadow of the icon Ngugi. Recasting this image seems a monolithic feat, which might or might not be done; I don't know whether that is good or bad.

The role of the Kenyan writer in the past is steeped in the baggage of colonial experience. Back then colonial education popularised the 3R's: Read, (w)Rite and (a)Rithmetic. Those who caught the *write* R ended up as writers. They wrote for the villages or communities they came from and against the antagonistic forces of colonialism. The writer back then created works the sustenance for which was the East African experience especially revolving around the centres of ideological exchange, in this case Makerere, Nairobi, and Dar-es salaam Universities. Figures of the pen included John Ruganda, Rubadiri, Ngugi, Okot p Bitek, Meja Mwangi, Tabaan Lo Liyong et al.

They might not have envisaged the turn of events in this generation. As a young and inexperienced writer it is easy to see that the Kenyan first generation writers did not anticipate the brooding of a television generation — a generation informed more by images than the word, a generation devoid of any abstraction and reflective thinking — (we have lost this, our capacities to think by engaging in the written word competes with the screen, a muse which steals every moment of the linear, logical and contemplative. There has been a killing of the book and the word, thus the literary artist is being choked if not being ignored).

THE ROLE BACK THEN

I should say first and foremost that the role of the Kenyan writer back then was to create and sustain the memory of our identity in its historical context. We have forgotten who we are largely because of a loosely written history, which sustains a poor picture of our past. The role of the literary artist was to colour our thoughts with cradle moments and things we might have easily forgotten. They had a role to honestly and accurately paint our identity before the colonial experience, the erosion of it and the possible salvage of our humanity and uniqueness.

The artist struggled against all forces, including the celebration of independence, to remind us of the true picture. The one thing most African governments forgot is

that independence should have covered politics, economics and culture. They took the first two, politics and economics, and ignored the last, culture. The literary artist at that time thus became the only cultural ambassador who stood in the gap to remind us that when we looked into the 'new' mirror of freedom from colonial rule what we were bound to see should not have been devoid of a cultural ingredient. So when we read their books we remember the villages, the rivers, the round huts, the names of places and people. When I read Achebe (a famous Africa Writer from West Africa) he has an indelible ability to capture village life taboos, sayings, customs, deities — there is a reliving of moments we never experienced as young twenty-first-century Africans. The distant historical other can be envisaged and thus we are able have a past that is not a vacuum. The only payment I can give these old writers is to read their books.

THE NEW ROLE BACK THEN

Their first antagonist was colonialism, and then came in the new governments of independence and a shift occurred — the postcolonial shift — and self-rule introduced new problems and daring writers began to critique those in power. Flags went up in speeches and inexperienced new leaders repeated promises that were to bring in a new nation. In our case, in the space of ten years, we were already experiencing assassinations. It seemed as though the only persons who could salvage the moment as the peoples' voice were the literary artists. The compounding responsibility now endowed on them isolated many a writer because they were seen as a threat to those in power. On the global scale the African governments were placed in the position of choice — was it to be east or west, was it to be communism or capitalism? There was even a non-aligned movement — a cluster of countries — that avoided the west/east side-taking. The African countries were experiencing the critical near-death vestiges of the Pan Africanism Movement. This was a critical season for ideological turbulence. Most books written at this time performed a literary acrobatics — centred between the colonial experience and the reality of neocolonialism and self-rule.

ENTER THE MARKET DRAGON

Previously, writing and the writer had been based on the personality cult. It was about an individual and his/her works. Then suddenly the textbook syndrome arrived. It is something that is big in Kenya. Many people who would have wanted to make a living out of money jumped on this train. The textbook market is based on the demand made by the government for books suitable for teaching in primary and high school. It would seem at this stage that many began writing not because they liked it but because it was going to pay. Some books were custom made for the syllabi. These kinds of writers were research fellows, former teachers, and persons with connections to government tenders for the supply of textbooks (but this is a whole other story about the textbook publishing industry). The writer who dwelt with issues in society disappeared or was ignored, and in

any case, government had changed and those we thought could shed the light and father novelists and language developers were in exile. Once in a while a writer would come up and publish but would not stay long because apart from economic sustainability, the writer needs an audience — people to read his /her books and give feedback. In fact it is only very recently, perhaps even in the last five or so years, that we have experienced book reviews and book fairs in this country. The vacuum created by the text book rush resulted in the brooding of journalists who would wield their pens in local dailies, tackling issues, but very few ever writing or publishing their own novels. In fact, I only know two or three journalists who have published their own novels. Among them, the late Wahome Mutahi leads my list. For me, having met him before his death and having studied his novels back in college, he was the most accessible. He popularised the current trend of thinking in codified urban Kenyan language, employing the platform of satire in a column that had tremendous success. Generally then, if you asked the basic Kenyan about writers they would mention journalists rather than novelists.

As it is, textbook publishing still rules and lures many but does not have significant contribution to the reality on the ground, especially the development of language and the intrusion of idiosyncratic styles and choice of linguistic expressions. Additionally, the blossoming of the television industry and fm radio stations locally and transmission of programmes from outside is the number one attention stealer of possible readers of the written word. The common phrase in Nairobi goes ‘Kenyans are not readers’: it is debatable but truly the issue is that Kenyans place no value on their own local writers and artists. The prevalent logic goes — if it comes from outside then it is good for Kenyans. Inter-media competition has encouraged people to find the convenience of information entertainment and education outside of the novel — in television or movies, and newspapers. In fact I normally say that if one wants to cause a reality crisis in Nairobi all one needs to do is bring a halt to newspapers and the gutter press for a day or two and switch of television and radio. I think if that were to happen the country would riot.

THE NEW NEW WRITER AND A TRICKY ROLE

The current literary scenario has been set and mostly jump-started by prize writing. The past two Caine Prize Awards won by Kenyans have prompted many of the revived closet Kenyan writers to come out and show their mettle. In my observation the new Kenyan writer is a twenty to thirty something fellow with ideological constraints pulling him on all sides, especially as far as identity is concerned. It is as if we suffer from some Afro-centric post modernity. We differ from the first pre- and postcolonial writers in many ways, a few of which are:

Reality — we differ in context and reality. This affects our sense of mission. When you ask us why we write you will find various answers; but it seems the cool and reflective thing to do. Most of us will be found somewhere in between

the mystical reality of historical search for our roots and the undeniable material world that asks whether we can be economically sustained by the phrases we write.

Mission — from the first point (above) we might be seen to have a ‘non-ideological’ mandate to write — few do it for a living and a calling. Most want to have written a novel or two. Maybe it is the pomp that comes with awards or maybe it is the genuine search for an expression that drives us. We are less likely to study the trend and development of writing and linguistic expression. The peculiar styles that philosophically express our reality are rarely conscious.

Artistic Responsibility — because of a lack of mission the grasp of the role of the artist in the community might not be a gauntlet we want to pick up. It would deny us the opportunity to pioneer artistic literary expressions or have a sense of freedom to project into the future. Many a penman in my day and age, especially from my generation, thinks of the existential moment. The media has contributed to this greatly because it tends only to focus on the prize-winners and star writers.

Role Models — we have few role models, persons that are accessible and not embalmed in an icon bubble. I attended Ngugi’s Home Coming Writers’ Workshop. He said one of his missions in his short stay was to meet young upcoming writers. Well he is back in the States and no such meeting took place. In fact the writing workshop I attended was only for twenty writers and most of them were the Nairobi elitist literary-donor-funded ilk. We lack the human-faced chaperon who coaches and mentors one in the craft.

A Renaissance Indeed — I wrote an article last year whose basic thesis was whether Kenya was experiencing a cultural revolution. The observation I have made has been that something of that sort is going on. It is predominantly heightened by the music and visual world. Young folk are cutting music CDs, performing plays, meeting in café’s for readings, spotting dreadlocks. Writing has been thrown in and is beginning to sprout incisors from the literary gum show. Where this will end or head we will have to wait and see but I think it is good.

CONCLUSION

I doubt strongly if the new literary artist understands his/her role in present day Kenya. I can only say that at least it is good that someone is writing. We have a long way to go, I hope we approach our role with increased awareness.

2 THE USE OF LANGUAGE AND ITS ROLE IN THE FUTURE OF KENYAN LITERATURE THE USE

How do we use language in Kenya? Relatively would be my answer. In a normal conversation there is a lot of mother tongue intrusion. In a typical Nairobi conversation it would be easy to pick out which part of the country the speaker comes from especially if they have heavy peculiar local language additives into English. Nairobi is basically a center of cultural integration. Language is one thing people spend without the basic rules of usage. The colonial generation is fading out and slowly giving way to arbitrary use of English. They were the ones

who were meticulous in the use of grammar, syntax, phonetics, prosody and the like. Then came MTV and sitcoms and less reading and people picked things up along the way. Language usage in Nairobi is a sign of status. We have basically mother tongue spoken in the villages, Kiswahili as the umbrella language, English spoken by the 'refined' or the intellectuals, then we have offshoot combination of Kiswahili and English, which breaks into two. On the one hand we have Sheng, which has more Swahili and local dialect intrusion, and on the other hand we have what we call Engsh with more derived English corruption than Kiswahili and local dialect.

Standard 'proper' English is a half-half chance found in most conversations unless it is a serious intellectual conversation without some sauce of intrusion of *kenyanized* phrases. Otherwise apart from Kiswahili, which is the umbrella tongue and various mother tongues, most people will fluctuate between Sheng and Engsh. Even then the divide is apparent and is dictated by status: the more affluent go with Engsh and the ghetto will thrive on Sheng. Mostly this will also cut across generations. The younger (38 and below if that is young) are immersed in the two shifts (sheng and engsh) so usage is both status-related and generational. This language use is essentially spoken and not written so its use in the future is based on a linguistic dynamism that will account for accommodation and growth of the languages especially when they tend to borrow from each other without the consideration of proper grammatical necessities.

LITERARY EXPRESSION AND ITS FUTURE

Most of the languages mentioned above are used primarily in verbal discourse. When it comes to writing then Kiswahili, local dialects and English are predominantly used. Kiswahili and English are official. Mother tongues/local dialects are used mainly in religious literature and have only of late been introduced in HIV/AIDS billboard campaigns.

When one tends to write in another language like Sheng it is seen as a violation of communication. Funnily enough it is more accepted in verbal than in written form. In fact the advertising agencies have of late been using it for various campaigns mainly because the constituent audience of young folk is becoming broad.

When it comes to prose, that is, literature (novels, poems etc), less has been seen in written format. Many, especially the older generation, may consider the use of Sheng prose as unpalatable, even suicidal. The use of Sheng is dreaded I think because it cannot be placed in a proper structure of linguistic rules and forms. It has the tendency of quickly mutating. Before you know it — in as little time as a couple of months or even a week, you will be chided for speaking old Sheng. Its acceptability in written format will take some time unless writers popularise it. Using such a language in literature will attract pockets of cult Sheng speakers. The threat seen in using Sheng as a language is in how it compares to English and the rest of the languages. Our linguistic gurus are silent on such issues or have one-sided arguments.

The Kenyan society largely suffers from a multiple personality as far as linguistic expression is concerned — one will be a different person in a context where Kiswahili is being spoken, different where English is being spoken and very different where Sheng or Engsh is being spoken. Trauma derives from the possibility that these personalities in one body never meet because even our choice of friends or posse can be dictated by which tongue we speak. Language multiplicity has encouraged us to perfect the art of acting — we play for the invisible cameras and hope that no one finds out who we really are.

I would not want to speculate what the role of language is going to be but there is an inevitable fusion of English and the rest of the languages, each looking for accommodation in the phrases and sentences of the other. It is a battle of language dominance and interpretation of realities or worldviews. The local dialect worldview is diminishing among the urbanites because they do not think in the vernacular. The language we predominantly think in will win the day. Knowing the Kenyan psychology I would say we are mimic men who have perfected our ability to become English. This is not necessarily in the strictest sense of well spoken and written language but in mannerisms and *fadistic* sense (if there is a word like that). It is laughable to think right now in Kenya that one is considered to have command of English if one has a twang (an American one for that matter). Our FM stations have promoted this attitude and our exposure to sitcoms and questions of image and identity have their part to play.

The future of usage of Language in Kenya will be largely based on literary artists, the vision they have and the best language in which to translate this vision. Whether the vision will represent the artists or the community at large is unknown.